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Anthropology For Sale

Jamie Cross and Luke Heslop

CHARLEY: Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that.

- *Arthur Miller, 1949, 'Death of a Salesman'*

Abstract

This introduction to the Anthropology for Sale special issue makes a case for renewed attention to the selling and salescraft in anthropology. Rather than presume to know in advance what kinds of ethics and interests underpin the moment of sale the contributors to this Special Issue ask how sales work allows people to perform themselves as moral actors. In this introduction we situate the moment of sale as a moment of possibility charged with play, charisma, spin and seduction, reflect on the language and rhetoric of selling, consider the presence of kinship, gender, class, caste in the marketplace, and emphasise the precariousness of selling in contexts of global economic uncertainty.

Introduction

What does it mean to sell something? What does it mean to be a seller of things? What does anthropology know about selling and what can selling tell us about life in precarious times?

In thinking through these questions this special issue sets out a stall for the anthropology of selling, offering papers that examine the moment of sale as an ethnographic moment. In doing so, we hope to put selling back into an anthropology of market economies, refocusing our attention on selling as a cultural practice and rejuvenating an engagement with communities of people for whom selling is also work or labour.

In French, Spanish and Portuguese the verb to sell is derived from its Latin root – *vendere* – which could mean to sell or advertise but also to recommend or to betray. In modern English the verb to sell has a Germanic root, *sellan*, with its earliest recorded usage meaning to 'give up', or to hand something over voluntarily in response to a request'. In reflecting on the meaning and act of selling in other languages across diverse global contexts - Poland, Turkey, Syria, India and Sri Lanka - the five contributors to this special issue all approach the moment of sale as a decisive moment: the moment in which markets are made.

Rather than presume to know in advance what kinds of ethics and interests underpin the moment of sale we ask how selling allows people to perform themselves as moral actors? We pursue the moment of sale as a moment of possibility charged with play, charisma, spin and seduction. We reflect on the language and rhetoric of selling; the presence of kinship, gender, class, caste in the marketplace; and the precariousness of selling in contexts of global economic uncertainty.

'The only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell'

This special issue takes its cue from a line in Arthur Miller's classic play 'Death of a Salesman'. 'The only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell', Charley - the successful neighbourhood businessman - tells Willy Loman, the striving, everyman. As any school textbook or exam guide can explain to first-time readers, we never really know what

Willy Loman sells but he spends most of the play trying to sell himself, his visions and dreams, his wisdom and experience, to his sons, Biff and Happy, and his wife, Linda.

The door-to-door salesman has a powerful place in narratives of 20th century Anglo American capitalism. If the expansion of electricity networks, grids of wires facilitated the expansion of urban markets for mass consumer goods across the United States (Hughes 1983), it was the arrival of the door-to-door salesman that brought these markets across the porch into the home. In Arthur Miller's work, however, the salesman was not a rugged or heroic individual - a 20th century cowboy, corralling a potential customer into a sale. Instead, Miller's salesman was an ambivalent figure, a small town businessman skilled at the art of selling but left vulnerable, insecure and precarious by the practice of the art, and by rapid transformations in post-war America. Just as suburban development created new opportunities for door to door selling, the growth of automobile ownership, the rise of supermarkets and self-service retail outlets presented new challenges to their business. Nowhere are the trials and tribulations of door-to-door salesmen and the arts of selling better or more sensitively captured than in David and Albert Maysles' classic 1969 documentary film. *Salesman*.

If salesmen have acted as a barometer for the economy so to they have come to act as lightning rods for public anxiety at the ambivalent moralities of the market. Such ambivalence is powerfully exemplified in Martin Scorsese's 2013 film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Here a magical - almost mythical ability - to sell things leads the larger than life salesman Jordan Belfort from worthless cars to worthless financial products, making him first a multi-millionaire, then a criminal, and then a self help guru.

By contrast, Willy Loman never makes a lot of money and never finds redemption. Instead, tired and exhausted, he sinks into suicidal depression. Of course, that doesn't make his story any less relevant, necessary or compelling. As Linda tells their sons. 'His name was never in the papers. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid!'

'Attention must be paid!'

'Attention must be paid!' What might it mean to pay ethnographic attention to the towering figures of small town marketplaces or the small time door to door salespeople striving to make a living in precarious and uncertain economic times? What do the lives and times of the salespeople of today look like in a global perspective?

During their respective periods of fieldwork across the globe, the contributors to this special issue have encountered men and women who are deeply invested in 'the sale'. These are people for whom livelihood and personhood is intimately connected to the work of selling; people who may reap rewards within the context of a transaction, in the variation between how much they buy something for and how much they sell it for, but whose individual fortunes remain shaped by wider spheres of economy and society (cf. Zaloom 2006). In our fieldwork, an optimistically erected trestle table with wares atop it or a carefully prepared market stall speaks not only to the material and moral economies of the seller but also to their hopes, aspirations and desires.

Like Willy Loman, the people we encountered did not always make much money. They were not in the papers and they were not always the most admirable of our interlocutors. Their everyday lives were rarely, if ever, focused on overcoming injustice or uplifting the poor, they were not concerned with the alleviation of suffering or even with the question of what a good society might be. Yet, their perspectives offered new insights into the market and the work of selling. In this special issue, then, we make a case for renewed attention to communities of salespeople. We hope that special issue will open up new

pathways for a comparative analysis of markets and market relations, laying the groundwork for a re-analysis of selling and salespeople through a comparative ethnographic focus on personhood, morality and practice at the moment of market exchange.

There has been a sustained, though implicit, engagement with selling in anthropology. Selling and sales people sit below the surface of much anthropological writings on economy and society, even as spaces or arenas of selling have remained important sites for ethnographic theory. In the 1940s and 1950s acts of buying and selling were significant in anthropology for what they promised to reveal about universal economic categories, motivations and logics. In the history of the discipline this is an era marked by debates between the 'formalists', who were broadly committed to the universal salience of key tenets of classical economics, and the 'substantivists', who were not (Hann and Hart 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, however, this debate became less relevant for social and cultural anthropologists who took for granted the 'embeddedness' of all market exchange. For them, the task was no longer simply to categorise the act of selling but to interpret it.

Clifford Geertz - now remembered as a pioneer of the cultural or interpretative turn in anthropology - wrote four books on economic development in Indonesia. Included in this corpus is *Peddlers and Princes* (1963), a book that compares the entrepreneurial strategies of traders in a Javanese bazaar with those of upper caste traders in Bali. The bazaar economy of Java, Geertz argued, had given rise to a culturally homogeneous group of peddlers, shopkeepers, and small-scale manufacturers who were driven to secure improved social status in a changing society through the accumulation of wealth.

For Geertz, there were clear parallels between the reformist Islam of these Javanese traders and the Protestant ethic that Max Weber (1958) associated with the rise of capitalism. By comparison, to understand the strategies of traders in princely Bali, Geertz argued, we should abandon a Marxist analysis of the relationship between princely elites and peasants. Rather, he proposed, this context demanded a deeper understanding of the complex interdependencies and dependencies engendered by relationships of hierarchy.

In Geertz's most famous essay, 'Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight' (1973) the workings of the market appear peripheral to the game. Nevertheless, cockfights were interesting for their participants - as well, he argued for the cultural analyst - because they had depth, moving the bet or gamble beyond the realm of formal economic concerns into the realm of what he called social psychology. Yet re-reading this work, Geertz's anthropology of the cockfight is also an anthropology of selling.

In Geertz' attempt to show how cultural products can be treated as 'texts', as Marxist William Roseberry eloquently critiqued (Roseberry 1982), the reader is offered little explicit analysis of the markets and trade within which the cockfight takes place. The longstanding relationship between market exchange and cockfights in rural Bali, was a footnote in Geertz' essay. 'Trade has followed the cock for centuries,' he wrote. Nevertheless, the connection of cockfighting to markets and market sellers was an important historic practice, marked in archaic inscriptions of royal edicts on stone or bronze. Moreover, as he documented, cockfights were widely understood by Balinese traders and merchants as being good for trade. Cockfights were often organised and sponsored by small groups of petty merchants under the general premise that cocks got money out of the house and made it circulate. On one level, then, the cockfight operated as a status bloodbath. On another level the cockfight operated a lubricant to market exchange. Indeed, we might say that it was the very willingness and ability of merchants to mobilise and capitalise on the symbolic drama of the cockfight that sustained it as an institution.

Moving away from Bali, but with an eye firmly on the symbolic dimensions of social relations, the publication of *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (1979) put the market squarely in the frame of Geertz' analysis. This

intensive ethnography of a single *suq* in Sefrou, Morocco, undertaken with his wife Hildred Geertz and their colleague Lawrence Rosen over six years, interpreted the bazaar as a kind of paradigmatic 'meta-symbol' for Moroccan society (Crapanzano 1981: 850). Here, the market – 'a place where half commercialized tribesmen meet super-commercialized shopkeepers on free if somewhat less than equal ground' (Geertz 1979: 129) – took center stage.

'What holds everything more or less together in this knockabout world', Geertz claimed, 'is that men want what others have and find it, normally, easier to *chaffer* it out of them than force it' (Geertz 1979: 197). Understanding what precisely it might mean to 'chaffer' money out of a customer led Geertz to consider questions of personality and charisma. For some anthropologists, like Geertz' co-author Lawrence Rosen, it was this 'free play of personality' that made the market, shaping the operation of everyday social life here (Rosen 1979: 20). He might have been paraphrasing Willy Loman. 'Walk in with a big laugh, don't look worried', that is how Willy Loman describes his strategy. 'Start with a couple of your good stories to lighten things up. It's not what you say, it's how you say it. Because personality always wins the day.'

In the wake of Geertz' writings, most anthropologists have tended to keep the 'play of personality' at bay and to focus instead on the structural logics of the market. In his classic study of a rural market or *haat* in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, for example, Alfred Gell (1982) drew on Geertz's legacy, to read the market space as a cultural text. For Gell, however, the market was important because of what it revealed about symbolic organisation. The bounded space of the market was, he showed, subject to a social order that originated from outwith its physical boundaries (see also, Östör 1984). In Gell's analysis the spatial divisions of market stalls in the *haat* mirrored the social segregation of caste society, with interactions between buyers and sellers reproducing stereotypes of status, and regenerating hierarchical relations.

If the moment of the sale remained at the margins of much 20th century economic anthropology perhaps it is because the interactional element in market exchange was often subordinate to concerns with the structures of market action. In Keith Hart's (1973) ethnographic work in urban Accra, Ghana, for example, street vending or hawking was presented as a majoritarian arena of economic activity and entrepreneurship. Hart's work revealed how vendors were subject to forms of social regulation and governance even as they remained 'informalised'. This work established the 'informal economy' as a legitimate object of ethnographic research for anthropology and development studies but kept the actual moment of exchange at arm's length.

Similarly, Bloch and Parry's edited collection of essays, 'Money and the Morality of Exchange' (1989) that built on Geertz and Gell's work. Their writings catalysed new interest in the comparative ethnographic study of markets, market actors and the circulation of money rather than in the work of selling itself (e.g. Vidal 2000, Heslop 2016). Daniel Miller's (1987, 1994, 1998) writings pushed the sale further from view; establishing the moment of consumption as an object of ethnographic enquiry and laying the ground for an analytical focus on the 'brand' and the 'work of branding' as integral moments of value creation and marketing (Foster 2008). Meanwhile, a neo-Marxist critique that anthropology had privileged 'exchange' but had failed to get to grips with 'production' (Hann and Hart 2011, p71) drove ethnographic studies of labour markets in South East Asia and Latin America. These accounts examined the terms and conditions under which young men and women sold their labour to multinational corporations at sites of global manufacturing (e.g. Nash and Kelly 1983; Ong 1987, Mills 1999).

By contrast, sociologists were taking the microsocial transactions or interactions at the heart of the sale more seriously. Drawing from Erving Goffman rather than Clifford Geertz, Trevor Pinch and Colin Clark's (1986, 1995) now classic account of street salesmen in

Britain showed how the arts of selling are always deployed within a framework of social and interactional rules, which are shared by the person selling and the potential customer who relies upon them to make buying decisions. For Pinch and Clarke, the challenge for any social analyst was understanding sales outcomes not in terms of abstract economic theory but in terms of the seller's success in capitalising on social or cultural convention. These lines of enquiry lay the grounds for new market studies in the field of economic sociology (e.g. Callon 1998, 2002, 2005; Cochoy 2008).

If there is one arena in which these interests in markets, morality, consumption and selling have converged over the past thirty years, perhaps, it is in the anthropology of pharmaceuticals and the study of so-called 'modern drugs' across sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-East Asia. Ironically, as Van der Geest et al (1996) point out in their review of the field, one of the first to draw attention to the informal or unregulated sale of 'patent medicines' in the Global South was Clifford Geertz, whose 1962 book *The Religion of Java*, had included a detailed footnote about a man selling medicine in a town square (p162). A concern with the communication of accurate dosage instructions and the health consequences of selling brand name or generic drugs without prescription led medical anthropologists to pioneer detailed interactional studies and observations at the point of sale.

Studies like those by Vinay Kamata and Mark Nichter (1998, 2001) offered detailed accounts of conversations between drug sellers and their customers, describing in detail how vendors sell their medicines and interact with their clientele. Whilst few such studies offered 'thick descriptions', 'rich in context' and the conceptual world of the sellers (ibid, p163), they also brought different communities of vendors - from itinerant hawkers to pharmacy attendants - into the same methodological and conceptual frame, and raised questions about trust, knowledge and economic practice at the moment of sale (Cross and MacGregor 2007). In the early 2000s the study of pharmaceutical marketing (e.g. Applbaum (2004, 2006) drew attention away from the interactional moment of sale to focus attention on the cultural politics of mediation that shape global markets for goods and services, connecting sales craft back to the anthropology of advertising and branding (Kemper 2001; Mazzerella, 2003). This work offered a trenchant reminder that business and marketing paradigms that had originated in the United States, or in specific industries and sectors, were a globally mobile element in capitalism's contemporary assemblages (Hann and Hart 2011, p160; Collier and Ong 2005).

By the end of the 2010s a new wave of economic anthropologists had focused attention on global financial industries. Anthropology's latent interest in selling re-materialised here as ethnographers focused on the combination of interests and passions that motivate traders selling complex financial products like collateralised debt obligations (e.g. Ho 2009). Today, one legacy of this work is an attentiveness to the new ways that digital information systems and electronic trading technologies have transformed the speed and efficiency of selling in global markets (e.g. Besky 2016).

The ethnographies of selling that we present here share an interest in the interactional detail that animates market exchange, just as they share a commitment to an interpretative tradition in economic anthropology. But, in unpicking the moment of sale, their analyses extend far beyond a focus on questions of individual charisma or social structure. Instead they show how the work of selling is shot through with generally understood obligations of kinship, political associations, and honour; although these are not always brought to bear on the moment of sale in predictable ways. Instead, as the contributors show, the moment of sale is rich with diverse and generative relational possibilities for individuals who dare to cultivate them.

Style, Personhood, Ethics

So what might global ethnographies of selling have to say to each other and what kind of theoretical innovation might we derive from a comparative anthropology of selling today? In this special issue, we bring together ethnographic writing that draws from these diverse currents whilst remaining centred on the person of the seller as a crucial agent of contemporary social, political and economic transformations.

All the papers gathered here share an interest in the ‘moment of the sale’. Taken together they offer a reminder that each moment of sale requires an acquired or practical know how: an intimate knowledge of the ‘informal rules’, ‘economic logics’, sentiments and reasons that shape economic action. At the same time, they remind us that each moment of sale makes the rules of the market afresh: affirming and re-establishing economic norms and values. Reading across the ethnographically developed comparative perspectives of selling presented here three themes reappear: style, personhood, ethics and we briefly discuss each in turn.

The first concerns the styles, strategies and techniques with which people attempt to make themselves persuasive? How do the arts of selling ‘sit on the skin’ and how is physical intimacy deployed in the work of selling? How is faith, piety or religious language made part of everyday sales-talk?

Anderson’s essay about market traders in an Aleppo *suq*, known locally and rather aptly as ‘*if you please madame*’, shows that the vendors’ notions of civility – polite etiquette (*adab*), proper style (*uslub*) and restrained or modest behaviour (*hasham*) – are in fact deployed instrumentally to persuade the customer and impel the transaction forwards towards a sale. Here, civility, as it is locally understood, is part of a tactical repertoire of persuasion. In a similar vein, Heslop shows how hospitality, courtesy and fear, assists commission agents in a wholesale vegetable market in Sri Lanka to persuade farmers to give them produce and persuade retailers to take it away.

In Turkey, Crăciun describes in detail how - for a headscarf-wearing designer-entrepreneur - the management of public displays of religious piety, such as taking up the veil, is of paramount import in the quest to be persuasive in the market for fashionable Islamic dress. Here, the significance of sincerity and risk of being considered insincere becomes wed to one’s ability to persuade.

Turning focus away from the typification of the fine salesperson as a man or woman who ‘can sell anything’ – the Jordan Belforts of the world – Magee’s essay illustrates how the aesthetics favoured in Krakowian renderings of selling place emphasis on a good salesperson not as a man or a woman who *persuaded*, but as one who *provided*. Magee argues that emphasis was placed on entrepreneurs as people who provided goods that were already needed or wanted, rather than as people who persuaded others to buy their wares, coercing them. A good product, as Magee’s title suggests, ‘sells itself’.

In rural India, meanwhile, Cross’s contribution follows a group of young men as they go, door-to-door, selling solar powered lanterns. How do you sell a solar lamp to India’s unelectrified rural poor? In the highlands of Orissa, solar salesmen work to establish themselves as figures of authority and in doing so renew forms of caste prejudice. Whilst the company they work for expresses empathy and proximity, attachment and connection to India’s indigenous or low caste communities, its rural salesmen are frequently more concerned to differentiate and distance themselves from these communities.

The second theme connecting these papers concerns the person of the seller and the idea of selling. How do salespeople speak of themselves (as businesspeople, traders, merchants, entrepreneurs or as hosts, mediators, patrons and arbiters) and how do they come to be described by others (as paragons or parasites of virtue, as insiders or outsiders)?

Magee’s contribution takes us into the Krakowian work place and the stymied complications of (bad) management. Here Magee explores the subjectivity of the

entrepreneur and the idea of selling oneself. Managers and workers alike place importance on perceived urbanity, achieved in part through language learning and side-projects that prepare them for self-employment. That present them as individuals capable of a certain kind of product discernment which makes them an appropriate provisioner. To offer a particular product to sell or provide, Magee argues, is to offer one's *self* up to appraisal on grounds of commonsense, morality, and expected longevity. For the young men in Cross's essay, 'the moment of sale' refers less to the time of a transaction than to that time in a life's trajectory when they identify themselves as salesmen. This is a moment of temporary and precarious employment, and selling is very rarely perceived as an endpoint.

In Heslop's essay, emphasis is placed on the seller as being perceived as just (*Sardanaya*), or less positively, as cunning (*capati*), these characteristics are read locally along religious and ethnic lines. For Anderson, the value of civility was central to techniques of salesmanship and modes of self-presentation. Production and presentation of the 'virtuous self' is at stake in the act of selling, and publicly demonstrated both before and after the moment of sale in Anderson's and Craciun's essays. For Craciun's informants, Instagram and Twitter becomes the field on which the subjectivity of the seller must be sold to the public, and where sales made are advertised and reflected upon. In Syria, sales were boastfully recounted, beyond the moment of sale itself, among men in the backrooms of the *Suq* shops.

Finally, each of the essays speak to the notion of selling as a practice through which people reflect on what it means to do or be good. Where and when do salespeople see selling as the practice of virtue, honour, trust and fairness and how does the space between what people do and what people say they do allow us to explore honour and shame, public and private spheres of admission and performance, and illegality? How do people articulate the fit or disjuncture between morality at the moment of market exchange and the ethics of everyday life?

In some of our examples, this means to perform or reflect upon piety, propriety, and correctness. While the notion of propriety appears particularly significant in the Islamic context put forward by Anderson and Craciun, the notion of correctness is pertinent in post-socialist Krakowian and in the cases from South Asia. When the worth of a salesperson lies not in his or her power to persuade, but in his or her knowledge of how difference works, what kinds of relationships are reproduced and reworked?

Taken together, the papers in this collection emphatically reinstate the act of selling and sales people as vital objects of anthropological enquiry. Together they offer a reminder that the transactional moment between buyers and sellers is an 'ethnographic moment' (Strathern 1999) in our understandings of capitalist economy. The moment of sale is a moment in which people and things become visible to each other in distinctive, novel or surprising ways; a moment in which markets, persons and ethics are made. In bringing these papers together, our aim is to bring anthropology's comparative method to bear on diverse different communities of sellers; from those who appear to benefit the most from market exchange to those who sell in contexts of economic precariousness and for whom selling offers only 'marginal gains' (Guyer 2004). Such a comparative approach, we argue, lays the groundwork for renewed attention to selling and salespeople in the contemporary world.

So that's the pitch. All we've got is what we can sell. Take it or leave it. Or give us your best price, your last price.

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